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Love, Sex, Beauty: Encountering Vladimir Solovyov on Eros and the Divine Sophia

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In Woody Allen's film *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy,* the protagonist (Allen, of course) tells another character that he thinks love and sex are not the same thing, but opposites, "because love creates stress and sex relieves it." For some, I am sure, it is the other way around. Nevertheless, Allen's one-liner points to a tension concerning these apparently warring faces of attraction.

In our culture, we find many casualties of this war. Witness, for one, the sorrowful spectacle of exploitation and exhibitionism found on MySpace, where it seems every young woman's keenest hope is to become a stripper or a lingerie model, every young man's to be a gangbanger. I recall a line of Apollinaire, "It was and I would prefer not to remember it was during beauty's decline."[1] In this desire for self-promotion and attention, which so rapidly diminishes the dignity of the human being, love ends up as the first casualty.

In philosophical and theological circles, the relationship of love and sex is a long-standing problem. It stands at the crux of the dilemmas of human life, questions of the body and the soul, and questions of the real and the ideal, of *eros* and *thanatos* are forever being asked. The Freudian response is, I believe, insufficient, as are almost all such attempted responses in our day. Reconciliation of the biological imperative with the

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[1] Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," *Selected Writings,* trans. Roger Shattuck, (New York: New Directions, 1971), 121.

search for transcendence remains unachievable in these demesnes; it always will.

One person who meditated long and hard on this problem was the English poet and divine John Donne. In his early work "The Flea," for example, Donne's poetic genius manifested itself most tellingly in the *carpe diem* school of love poetry. Love was a game with conquest the object; its prize the taking of a maidenhead. Donne's concentration on sexual conquest as a youth, however, transfigured in his maturity into a desire for intimacy with God. In Holy Sonnet XIV, for instance, the poet compares the love of God to rape:

> Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
> Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
> I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,
> Labour to admit You, but O, to no end!
> Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,
> But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
> Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,
> But am betrothed unto Your enemy:
> Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
> Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
> Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.[2]

Donne knew from experience, both sacred and profane, that love is a game. But he realized that while we may think we pursue a sexual or amatory goal, it is really God who pursues us. In this sense, *eros* functions simply as a variety of divine bait.

This concept is nothing new. Plato discusses this situation first in the *Phaedrus* and then again in the *Symposium.* His discussion of *eros* in the latter is particularly intriguing. There, Socrates' teacher Diotima describes love as a desire for "the

[2] *John Donne's Poetry,* ed. A.L. Clements (New York: Norton, 1966), lines 1–14.

everlasting possession of the good."[3] Elsewhere in the *Symposium*, Plato describes love in homoerotic terms, even to the point of pederasty.

The culture of Plato's Athens characterized itself by a virulent strain of homoeroticism, which, I suppose, might be a point of interest for postmodern perspectives on homosexuality. Yet both are tragic. In his work, Plato meditates upon morality, upon the good, the true, and the beautiful – concepts postmodern culture views with disdain if not unbridled derision. On the other hand, Plato's homoeroticism – and his culture's – is homoerotic at the expense of the feminine. The ancient Greeks valued homosexuality because they deemed women inferior to men. This is a repulsive logic; but it is logic, nevertheless, though grounded on a false assumption.

Since the dawn of Christianity the problem of the erotic has persecuted Christians with impunity, both within and without the precincts of the Church. Saint Paul, in the seventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, is all at sixes and sevens as to how to treat the dilemma of marriage vs. celibacy. He affirms that to remain celibate would be best if possible, though he concedes it usually is not. Origen, who only missed out on being counted a Church Father by a too vivid strain of Platonism, castrated himself when the temptations of the flesh proved too much to bear, an extreme response to say the least. Origen's solution points to the assumed antagonism many have suggested exists between sex and the soul, or, as one might better say, between *eros* and *psyche.*

The cultural milieu into which the Church was born was marked by licentiousness and excess as well as by asceticism and fundamentalism. In short, it was very much like our own era. Doubtless, the pagan world, like ours, was antagonistic to Christian sensibilities; but the biggest problem presented to the Church in its infancy – and throughout its history – was within the Christian fold itself. I speak here of Gnosticism.

Various sects in the Gnostic communion vacillated between extreme celibacy and extreme license. Jean Guitton describes the Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality adroitly. "One

[3] *The Dialogues of Plato,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937 [1892]), 1:330.